

United States Department of Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Sheboygan Theater  
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number	826 North Eighth Street	N/A	not for publication
city or town	Sheboygan	N/A	vicinity
state Wisconsin	code WI	county Sheboygan	code 117 zip code 53081

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Flora L. Bell*  
Signature of certifying official/Title  
Date 11/12/99  
State Historic Preservation Officer-WI

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  
( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Sheboygan Theater

Sheboygan

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

*Edson H. Beall*

12/22/99

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(check as many boxes as apply)

private

public-local

public-State

public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

building(s)

district

structure

site

object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

contributing      noncontributing

1                      0 buildings

   sites

   structures

   objects

1                      0 total

**Name of related multiple property listing:**  
(Enter "N/A" if property not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources is previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/theater

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation Concrete

walls Brick

Terra Cotta

roof Asphalt

other Wood

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Sheboygan Theater  
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County and State

Wisconsin

## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

### Period of Significance

1928

### Significant Dates

1928

### Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

### Architect/Builder

United Studios, Inc./Architect

Immel Construction Co./Builder

### Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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### 9. Major Bibliographic References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous Documentation on File (National Park Service):**

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested previously listed in the National Register previously determined eligible by the National Register designated a National Historic landmark recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

State Historic Preservation Office  
 Other State Agency  
 Federal Agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other

Name of repository:

### 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property Less Than One Acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 16 442590 4844560  
Zone Easting Northing

3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

2 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

### 11. Form Prepared By

name/title	Timothy F. Hegland/ Consultant for the City	date	May 20, 1998
organization	of Sheboygan Dept. of Planning & Development	telephone	608-251-9450
street & number	1311 Morrison Street	zip code	53703
city or town	Madison	state	Wisconsin

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**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs** Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional Items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title		date	
organization	Sheboygan Community Theater Foundation		
Street & number	1924 South Eighth Street		telephone
City or town	Sheboygan	state Wisconsin	zip code 53081

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Sheboygan County, WI

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The motion picture industry built extravagant movie palaces in cities all across the nation in the 1920s and the Sheboygan Theater is an exceptionally fine and very intact example of this now highly endangered resource type. This 1550-seat combined motion picture and live theater building was constructed in the heart of Sheboygan's downtown in 1928 at a cost of \$600,000 for the Milwaukee Theater Circuit of the Universal Pictures Corporation. The Theater's Spanish Colonial Revival style design was created by architects employed by United Studios, Inc. of Chicago, a firm that specialized in designing and building movie theaters, and the general contractor was the Immel Construction Co. of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. This steel frame T-plan building has a twenty-two-foot-wide two-story-tall terra cotta-clad main facade that fronts onto N. Eighth Street, this facade being both the public front of the Theater and the east end of a 22-foot-wide x 90-foot-long rectilinear plan wing that contains the Theater's ticket office and entrance lobby. The west end of this wing is attached to the east-facing side elevation of the 70-foot-wide x 130-foot-long rectilinear plan auditorium wing of the Theater, the north-facing main elevation of which fronts onto Niagara Avenue. The N. Eighth Street facade is the Theater's only architecturally treated elevation, its other elevations all being clad in brick and having almost nothing in the way of ornamentation or any but a purely functional arrangement of window and door openings. The Sheboygan Theater's relatively modest exterior, however, is more than made up for by the interior, which is an excellent and still mostly intact example of the elaborate atmospheric designs that came into vogue in the larger movie theaters of the 1920s, the interior in this case being designed to resemble a summer evening in a romantic Spanish garden.

The Sheboygan Theater was the largest and most important movie theater built in Sheboygan during the twentieth century and it retained its preeminence until the growth of Sheboygan's suburbs following World War II and the advent of television rendered it increasingly obsolete. In 1980 the Theater's original auditorium was divided into two smaller theaters by building two plywood-walled rooms within the existing space, and other changes were made as well. By the mid 1990s, however, even this half-hearted attempt at modernity had been abandoned and the building sat empty until recently, when the Sheboygan Community Theater Foundation acquired it and began the outstanding restoration program that is now returning the Sheboygan Theater to its former glory.

The city of Sheboygan is a port located on the west shore of Lake Michigan at the mouth of the Sheboygan River and the Sheboygan Theater is located in the center of the historic downtown business district of the city, a district whose southern boundary is formed by a large bend in the course of the east-west flowing Sheboygan River.<sup>1</sup> Land in the center of this four-block-wide by ten-block-long district is mostly flat except along its west and south edges, both of which slope down to the river. The block on which the Theater is located is bounded by N. Eighth Street on the east, N. Ninth Street on the west, Niagara Avenue on the north, and Wisconsin Avenue on the south. The main facade of the Theater faces east onto the north-south running Eighth Street, which in 1928 ran uninterruptedly south across the Sheboygan River. In the 1980s, however, the original traffic pattern in this area was altered for the creation of the Plaza 8 redevelopment project, one of whose goals was to turn much of the downtown portion of Eighth Street into a pedestrian shopping mall. As a consequence, the Eighth Street-Jefferson Avenue intersection was redesigned to become the southern terminus of this mall. Eighth Street was then closed off just below Jefferson Avenue, forming a cul-de-sac, and this arrangement lasted for nearly a decade. Since then, however, this cul-de-sac has been removed, Eighth Street has been reopened, and the

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<sup>1</sup> The 1990 population of Sheboygan was 48,085.

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former intersection of Jefferson Avenue and Eighth Street has been reconfigured and now serves as the beautifully landscaped southern entrance to the city's historic original downtown, which is now in the process of being renovated.

Historically, Eighth Street was the busiest, most important thoroughfare in Sheboygan and until recently it always has been lined with the city's major commercial establishments, including its largest banks and department stores. The buildings that now line this street date from the 1870s to the 1980s and many of the more important architectural styles that were developed during this broad span of years can be seen in their designs. Eighth Street buildings range from one to eight stories in height, they are mostly clad in masonry, and they are positioned with their principal elevations flush with the sidewalks with their side elevations abutting one another. Some of the older buildings that once fronted on this street have now been demolished, but many others are still extant, including the recently renovated Wolff-Jung Company Shoe Factory building (NRHP 1-30-92), the recently restored Henry Foeste Store building at 531 S. Eighth Street (NRHP 9-1-95), and the outstanding, recently restored Max Zaegel Building, which is located on the southeast corner of N. Eighth Street and New York Avenue.

With the exception of its N. Eighth Street facade, the highly intact exterior of the Sheboygan Theater is largely devoid of ornament or of architectural interest. This was true of most of the other large movie theaters of the day, nearly all of which were built in an already existing urban setting that precluded giving every elevation an architectural treatment. The Sheboygan Theater has poured concrete foundation walls that enclose a full basement story. The exterior walls that rest on this foundation are constructed out of brick, with the exception of the main facade, which is clad mostly in terra cotta, and all the walls are supported by a steel framework. Because the entrance lobby wing of the Theater was designed to be inserted between two nineteenth century commercial buildings that adjoin it to the north and south, this wing is also two stories in height, but since both its south-facing and north-facing side elevations are mostly hidden by these two buildings, they were designed without decoration or openings of any kind. In addition, the main facade and the side elevations of this wing are each terminated by parapet walls, the parapet of the main facade being especially tall, and these walls hide the slightly sloping, poured asphalt-covered roof that shelters the wing. The much larger attached auditorium wing behind occupies the whole west half of the northeast quarter of the block. It has concrete floors and also a concrete roof that is supported by steel trusses and is edged by shallow parapet walls. The cream brick-clad east-facing side elevation of this wing has the entrance lobby wing attached to its center. The south-facing cream brick-clad rear elevation faces onto an alley that bisects the block from east to west. The cream brick-clad west-facing side elevation now faces a parking lot that comprises the northwest corner of the block, and the brown brick-clad north-facing elevation fronts onto Niagara Avenue and contains the principal exit doors of the Theater.

**EXTERIOR**

**Entrance Lobby Wing**

This rectilinear plan wing has a reinforced concrete foundation and cream brick walls, the main facade being clad in terra cotta over brick. The east half of this wing contains the two-story entrance lobby space. The remainder of the wing is one story; the difference in height is visible on the south-facing side elevation of the wing.

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East-Facing Main Facade

Like its neighbors on N. Eighth Street to the north and south, the Sheboygan Theater's main facade is set flush with the concrete sidewalk that edges Eighth Street. The Theater's twenty-two-foot-wide symmetrically designed facade is one-bay-wide and its first story consists of a full-width outer lobby that is deeply inset within the facade itself and sheltered by a large rectilinear plan full-width flat-roofed metal canopy marquee. Three pairs of modern metal-framed one-light entrance doors now form a continuous screen across the entire width of the outer lobby and divide the entrance from the inner lobby. Historic photos show that this entrance has undergone several transformations during its history. The original appearance is unknown, but it probably reflected the overall Spanish Colonial/Mediterranean Revival appearance of the facade. A newspaper article written just prior to the opening of the Theater describes its box office as being "octagonal in shape with compo ornaments, marble base and handsomely decorated marble shelves."<sup>2</sup> The same article also described the now non-extant vertical marquee that was originally attached to the facade above the canopy marquee. "The huge electrical sign, which is to attract the eyes of the people in the downtown sections after dark each night was finished today. It is the largest in the city, as well as one of the most beautiful, illuminated by a myriad of lights. Below the sign is an electrically illuminated attraction board [the canopy marquee], which will announce the present and coming attractions."<sup>3</sup>

A 1942 photo (see Photo No. 2) shows that the original entrance had been modernized using Art Moderne elements, such as a streamlined and metal-clad central ticket office booth having rounded corners and metal-clad corner display cases that also had rounded corners, all of which have since been removed. In addition, the canopy marquee that currently shelters the entrance may date from this remodeling as well. This marquee is still largely intact and it is especially notable for its cylindrical corners, with their rows of stud lights. Missing now, though, is the original horizontal sign that crowned it, which carried the name of the theater in neon letters.

The portion of the facade above the canopy marquee is still in a highly intact state. This one-bay-wide symmetrically designed elevation extends well above the height of the facades that flank it and it is clad entirely in terra cotta tiles. Centered on the wall surface just above the marquee, within a taller, very slightly depressed rectilinear panel covered in tan terra cotta tiles, is a single, very large round-arched window opening. The window is framed by twisted terra cotta columns whose capitals act as impostes for the arch above. This arch is entirely enframed with flattened shell-like terra cotta tiles, each of which is decorated with a small floral ornament. The opening originally contained an elegant thirty-nine-light fixed sash window that was later removed. Fortunately, since the picture (see Photo No. 1) taken in mid-1997 for this nomination, an identical replacement window has been installed in the opening as part of the present restoration effort, returning this portion of the facade to its original appearance. The rest of the facade is faced with molded terra cotta ornamental tile. The crowning parapet

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<sup>2</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 14, 1928, p. 8. Presumably, this ticket office was a free-standing element in the center of the vestibule. Recent restoration work has uncovered the vestibule's original wall and ceiling surfaces, which are coated in heavily textured "Spanish Style" stucco, with the ceiling surface divided into two sections by exposed beams that are covered with molded and ornamented plaster and supported by console brackets in the corners.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



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wall consists of a blind arcade whose arches are carried on small twisted columns. The whole is crowned by an overhanging cornice whose sloping roof is clad in ceramic tiles and framed by two pilasters that are each crowned with a terra cotta urn.

**North-Facing Side Elevation**

The cream brick-clad, north-facing, 90-foot-long, two-story-tall side elevation of the entrance lobby wing is mostly hidden from view by the adjacent building; only the last ten feet or so are visible from an alleyway that runs behind the buildings fronting on N. Eighth Street that are located to the north of this wing. Consequently, there are no doors or window openings of any kind on this elevation, nor any decoration. The elevation is crowned with a terra cotta coping of standard finish and dark brown color.

**South-Facing Side Elevation**

The east 60-feet of the cream brick-clad, south-facing, 90-foot-long side elevation of the entrance lobby wing is two-stories tall and is hidden from view by the adjacent building. The remaining thirty feet is one-story in height and is visible from another alleyway that runs behind the buildings fronting on N. Eighth Street that are located to the south of this wing. Consequently, there are no doors or window openings of any kind on this elevation, nor any decoration, and it is also crowned with a terra cotta coping of standard finish and dark brown color.

**West-Facing Rear Elevation**

The west end of the entrance lobby wing is attached to the auditorium-wing, which completely covers it.

**Auditorium Wing**

The essentially rectilinear plan auditorium wing has a partially exposed reinforced concrete foundation and brick walls. This wing contains the main lobby and the theater auditorium and most of it is four-stories-tall, but the south end of the wing, which contains the back stage space and attendant theater apparatus, is five-stories tall.

**East-Facing Side Elevation**

The cream brick-clad, 130-foot-long, east-facing side elevation of this wing is bisected by the entrance lobby wing, which is attached to it at a right-angle. The south half of this elevation faces onto any alleyway that runs behind the stores fronting on N. Eighth Street that are located to the south of the lobby wing and it has no openings of any kind nor decoration. The north half of the elevation has a one-story flat-roofed ell placed across its whole length. It faces onto a second alleyway that runs behind the stores fronting on N. Eighth Street that are located to the north of the lobby wing. The south end of this ell is attached to the north elevation of the lobby wing and the ell contains a hallway that connects the entrance lobby to the main lobby, which is located in the north end of the auditorium wing. Placed in the story above this ell, at the north end of the main wall of this elevation, are three flat-arched window openings that contain one-over-

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one-light double hung wood sash. One of these windows lights the theater manager's office, the other two are smaller and light the second story women's bathroom. Otherwise, the north half of this elevation contains no openings or decoration of any kind and the entire elevation is crowned with a dark brown terra cotta coping.

**South-Facing Rear Elevation**

The five-story tall rear elevation of this wing fronts on another alleyway that actually bisects the entire block from east to west. This elevation is also clad in cream brick and its only decorative elements are five full height pilaster strips that are more or less evenly distributed across its width. A single large flat-arched double door opening having a concrete lintel is located in the left-hand corner of the elevation and this contains two original side-hinged solid metal doors. The entire elevation is crowned with dark brown terra cotta coping.

**West-Facing Side Elevation**

At least a small portion of the cream brick-clad west-facing side elevation of the auditorium wing was originally hidden by adjacent one and two-story buildings, but these have all now been demolished and the elevation now fronts onto a large black-topped parking lot. This elevation has only two small flat-arched single door openings, one being located just to the right (south) of the mid-point of the elevation and the other at the extreme right, and both these openings still contain their original side-hinged metal doors.

**North-Facing Main Elevation**

The main elevation of this wing faces north onto Niagara Avenue and, because it fronts onto a public street, it is clad in brown brick, instead of the cream brick that was used on the other elevations. In addition, the exposed concrete foundation visible elsewhere on the wing is here clad in stone. Two large deeply inset flat-arched door openings that are the theater's principal exits are placed at either end of this elevation. The triple doors within each opening are solid and made out of metal and each group is reached by ascending a short flight of concrete steps that is completely contained within the opening. The only other openings on this elevation are two small, square, six-light window openings located high up and in the center of the elevation and a slightly smaller square, one-light window that is located slightly lower down and to the right (west).

The elevations' only decoration consists of a few simple decorative patterns set within the wall surface itself and created by using the same brick that the wall itself is made of. A stringcourse made of a course of soldier bricks spans the width of the elevation just above the door openings and two more such courses separated from each other by two stretcher courses are placed high up on the elevation near the top of the parapet wall that crowns it. In addition, three very large rectangles outlined with courses of soldier bricks are evenly distributed across the broad wall surface between the upper and lower stringcourses.

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**INTERIOR**

As its designers intended, it is the Sheboygan Theater's largely intact interior that is its most notable feature. The general plan of the interior can best be understood by describing the path followed by patrons of the theater. Patrons enter the building on N. Eighth Street and proceed from the open outer lobby straight ahead (west) through the main entrance doors and into the two-story-tall entrance or inner lobby. They then continue straight ahead into a less wide but equally long one-story-tall, slightly downward-sloping corridor. The inner and outer lobbies and the corridor together comprise the entrance lobby wing. At the end of the slope this corridor turns 90° to the right and patrons then continue north and ascend a slight incline before turning 90° to the left (west), where they finally enter the two-story-tall main lobby that occupies the north end of the auditorium wing. The three main entrances to the auditorium are located in the south wall of the main lobby, while twin stairs on the north wall ascend to two small upper lobbies that serve the balcony. The south end of the very large auditorium that is the final destination of the patrons has a raised stage that is enframed by a large proscenium arch while a sweeping horseshoe-shaped balcony is cantilevered out over the north end. This elaborate spatial sequence was partially dictated by the Theater's site, but it was also carefully orchestrated to give patrons a heightened sense of expectation that was finally realized upon reaching the lavishly decorated main lobby and auditorium. It also permitted the sizable crowds that patronized the theater to be moved about swiftly and safely.

**Entrance Lobby Wing**

**Outer Lobby**

The entrance lobby wing contains a one-story outer lobby or foyer, a two-story inner lobby, and a one-story corridor. The outer lobby is inset into the main east-facing N. Eighth Street facade and it is 22-feet in width and 21-feet in length. It has a checked tile floor, hand-palmed plaster walls of the type that is found throughout the interior, and a beamed ceiling. Newspaper accounts published when the Theater opened also noted that coming attraction boards that displayed posters and photographs once lined the walls of the outer lobby, but these have since been removed. The current three pairs of main entrance doors to the theater form a continuous screen across the west end of the outer lobby and they are of modern date, have bare metal frames and single large lights, and are surmounted by a full-width three-light transom that is also enframed in bare metal.

**Inner Lobby**

The inner lobby is two-stories-tall, 22-feet in width and 37-feet in length, the concrete floor is covered with modern wall-to-wall carpeting, and it is in this room that patrons first experienced the lavishness of the decor that was to come. Part of this lavishness is spatial in nature. Because the one-story-tall outer lobby space is actually inset within the two-story inner lobby, the space in the story above the outer lobby was left open and became part of the space of the inner lobby. As a result, the main facade's large round-arched window is visible in the inner lobby's interior, which it helps light, and a metal balustrade, placed above the main entrance doors that form most of the inner lobby's one-story-tall east-facing inner wall, helps to create the illusion that the space above the outer lobby is actually a balcony reached by invisible stairs.

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The walls of the rectilinear plan inner lobby are covered in hand-palmed plaster, as are the ceilings. A shaped plaster cornice covered in classically derived ornamentation encircles the lobby at the one-story level and forms the base of the balustrade just mentioned. The north and south-facing side walls of the lobby are identical and their first stories are both decorated with three shallow, flat, round-arched recesses, while elaborate cast iron Spanish style lanterns placed on top of slanting cast iron standards are attached to the walls between the recesses help to light the room. The upper stories of these side walls are each decorated with centered pairs of tall, thin, attached engaged columns, each of which rests on a console bracket. These columns are made of carved plaster and each pair flanks a large raised plaster cartouche that is ornamented with swags and that has a dancing figure of a woman placed upon it. The capitals of these columns butt up against some of the plaster-covered beams that form a grid that covers the lobby's ceiling.

The first story of the west-facing wall of the lobby contains the wide flat-arched opening that opens into the corridor that eventually leads to the main lobby. This opening is placed off-center and to the right on the wall and a tall round-arched ventilator opening that is covered by an elaborate Spanish style painted metal grille is placed to the left (south). Spanning the width of the second story of this wall is another bit of architectural illusion-making. This is another balustrade that has three sets of turned wood balusters placed between four square plinths; each plinth serves as the base for a tall carved plaster column. These columns have the appearance of acting as the supports for an arcade consisting of three shallow round-arched recesses, but these recesses are actually built out from the main wall behind.

#### Corridor

The walls and ceiling of this gently sloping one-story-tall L-plan corridor are also covered in hand-palmed plaster, while the floor is concrete and is covered with modern wall-to-wall carpeting. The first portion of the corridor, the one that extends from the entrance lobby, it runs from east to west, and it slopes gently downward. Two more pairs of elaborate cast iron Spanish style lanterns placed on top of slanting cast iron standards are attached to the walls at each end of it and provide illumination. Dominating the west end of this stretch of the corridor is a large shouldered-arch opening set into the east wall of the auditorium that is used only as an exit, not as an entrance. Located adjacent to this opening on the south wall of the corridor is a small flat-arched entrance door opening that contains a single original one-panel wood door, while on the north wall opposite is the large opening that is the entrance to the continuation of the corridor, which from that point ascends gradually to the main lobby that is located at its north end.

#### Auditorium Wing

##### Corridor

This upward-sloping one-story-tall section of the corridor runs from north to south and its walls and ceilings are also covered in hand-palmed plaster and its concrete floor is covered with modern wall-to-wall carpeting. At its north end, one turns to the left and enters the main lobby, which was originally known as the Grand Lobby.

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Grand Lobby

The rectilinear plan two-story tall Grand Lobby (see Photo No. 8) is approximately 25-feet- wide x 70-foot-long and it spans the entire width of the north end of the auditorium wing. As its name implies, this room is second only to the main auditorium itself in terms of its size and its high degree of interior finish. The designers of the Theater gave both of these rooms a Spanish Colonial Style-inspired decor whose elaborate Baroque elements have more in common with South American and Latin American examples of the style than with the usually more simple North American examples. In the Grand Lobby this manifests itself in spatial elaboration, in the irregular hand-rubbed plaster surfacing of its walls and of its heavily beamed vaulted ceiling, and in the use of shouldered arch openings and very shallow shouldered arch wall recesses, elaborate wrought iron elements, and carved plaster columns.

The concrete floor of the lobby is now covered in modern wall-to-wall carpeting and the walls are coated in hand-rubbed plaster and are crowned with wide molded plaster cornices. The south wall of the lobby separates it from the auditorium and this entire wall is actually slightly concave, with the curved side facing into the lobby. Three large shouldered arch openings are evenly distributed along this wall and the lower portion of each one is filled with a full-width wrought iron balustrade.<sup>4</sup> Placed between these openings and on the extreme left and right ends of the south wall are the auditorium's four main entrances. The two middle entrances also have shouldered arch openings, although the shoulders in these cases are composed of paired console brackets, while the two openings at the far ends of the wall have flat-arched openings. The result is a symmetrically disposed hierarchy of openings and entrances. The middle opening (this being one of the three openings that is spanned with a balustrade) is further emphasized by placing it within a very shallow nearly two-story-tall shouldered arch recess that originally had a large painted mural depicting a pair of Spanish dancers placed above it. In addition, the two entrances that flank this center opening are both placed within less tall shouldered arch recesses of their own and are each surmounted with a large molded plaster shield that is decorated with a caducean emblem; the two remaining openings and the two remaining entrances are not emphasized. In addition, four more elaborate cast iron Spanish style lanterns placed on top of slanting cast iron standards are attached to the walls on either side of the center opening and on the outer sides of the two flanking entrances.

Centered on the north wall of the lobby is a symmetrical divided staircase with a central preliminary run that has balancing runs on either side that lead up to a mezzanine level that serves the auditorium balcony. All the steps rest on walls that themselves rest on the main floor and these steps are edged with balustrades that have wrought iron newels in the form of twisted columns, twisted wrought iron balusters with cast iron decorative panels set in between them, and a molded wood handrail. The vaulted ceiling over this portion of the lobby has deeply coved sides and a flat top. It is divided into sections by exposed plaster-covered beams. In addition, three rectilinear ventilator openings that are covered in cast iron grills are inset into the flat ceiling of the vault and two large elaborate cast iron candelabra that light the lobby are suspended from the ceiling.

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<sup>4</sup> These openings were originally also partially enclosed with heavy velvet curtains as well, but these have since been removed. The lobby also originally contained several Spanish Colonial Revival style wooden chairs as well, but these have also now been removed.

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Located at the top of each of the two branching runs of the lobby staircase is a short colonnaded loggia that leads to one of the two main shouldered arch entrances that open into the auditorium's balcony. These loggias are partially suspended over the east and west ends of the lobby's main story and they also cover the lobby's main exit vestibules, which are inset and enclosed and are placed at the east and west ends of the lobby's north wall. Both loggias have flat ceilings that are supported by three elaborately carved plaster columns that rest on paneled plinths, these plinths also being used to separate the two sections of wrought iron balustrade that edge each loggia.

**Auditorium**

The core of the Theater and its largest and most elaborate space is its 1550-seat auditorium. This grand, remarkably intact space was originally built to show both motion pictures and live theater and it consists of a four-story-tall rectangular room that has wall surfaces that are, for the most part, covered in hand-rubbed plaster finish, and a reinforced concrete main floor that slopes gradually downward to the stage located at its south end. Seating on the main floor is arranged in a fan shape and consists of parallel rows of seats that are divided by two aisles that converge on the flat area in front of the full-width raised stage that is placed at the base of the very large proscenium arch that dominates the front (south) wall of the room. At the opposite end of the room, a massive flattened horseshoe-shaped balcony is cantilevered out over the rear portion of the main floor and it has two sloping tiers of parallel rows of seats that are separated from each other by a cross aisle and further divided by two aisles.

The rear (north) wall of the auditorium is slightly curved, but the junction where it meets the ceiling forms a right angle that is covered by a large plaster-coated denticulated cornice. The junction where the room's front and side walls meet the ceiling, on the other hand, consist of very large quarter-round coves that help to blur the distinction between wall and ceiling and thus help to dissolve the room's spatial boundaries. In addition, the two curved ends of the solid balustrade that comprises the front edge of the balcony are extended out across the mid-portion of the east and west side walls of the auditorium, where they function as aisles leading to side exits and serve to bisect the side walls into lower and upper halves of unequal height.

Up to this point, the description of the auditorium given above could also apply to many other movie theaters of the same size and date of construction, but in fact the interior is actually far richer than this general description suggests. The Sheboygan Theater's auditorium is a fine example of the "atmospheric" designs that theater designers applied to the interiors of many movie theaters in the last half of the 1920s and in the 1930s. These designs consciously strove to create the illusion that once inside the theater the theatergoer was in fact not in Sheboygan or Akron or wherever, but in some exotic and dreamlike locale far removed from everyday existence. In this case, the designers strove to recreate a night in a garden of old Spain and they did this, appropriately enough, in much the same way as a movie set was constructed; creating a sense of place through the use of illusion.

The larger movie theaters of the silent picture era such as the Sheboygan Theater, for instance, typically had large pipe organs as part their standard equipment, so space for the numerous pipes associated with these instruments had to be found. Because these pipes were usually housed in tall enclosures flanking the stage, the designers of the Sheboygan Theater made a virtue out of necessity and created two identical two-story-tall Spanish Baroque style structures made of

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plaster to house them. These twin structures flank the proscenium arch of the stage and their wall surfaces are covered in hand-rubbed plaster. The first story of each of these structures contains a large shouldered arch opening set into a very shallow shouldered arch recess, this opening being one of the theater's principal exits. Two pairs of tall, fluted, coupled and engaged plaster columns set on tall plinths flank these openings, above each is a large oblong ventilator opening covered with an elaborate wrought iron grill that is itself surmounted by a balconet supported by paired console brackets. Each balconet has a solid balustrade whose surface is decorated with paneling and cartouches and these balconets are each placed in front of an arcade that consist of three tall round-arched openings (the middle one is the tallest) that are separated from each other by tall, thin, carved plaster columns.<sup>5</sup> Each arcade is flanked on either side by two more pairs of very tall, coupled, engaged, and elaborately decorated plaster columns that are superimposed on the pair below and a large, elaborately modeled, circular plaster medallion is placed on the wall surface above the center of the three openings in each arcade. The entire structure is crowned with an elaborate shaped gable motif.

These two structures have a pronounced Spanish Baroque style appearance and they are used to visually anchor the stage end of what is in effect a continuous screen of architectural elements of similar design that are arrayed along the side walls of the room (see Photos No. 9 & 10). Placed next to (north of) each of the structures just described is another slightly shorter, much less elaborate section of wall that continues the overall Spanish motif of the room through the use of another second story arcade (this one having just a pair of unequal height round-arched openings separated by a single carved column) and an elaborately shaped parapet wall above. Similar plaster-clad architectural motifs are arrayed along the entire length of the side walls above the level of the balcony extensions mentioned earlier, while the surfaces of the side walls below these balcony extensions are decorated with three large, very shallow shouldered arch recesses. The total effect of all of these elements is to create the illusion of being seated within a splendid outdoor courtyard that is located in some old Spanish or South American city. This illusion is enhanced by the use of expertly painted wall murals on the smooth wall surfaces above these elements. These murals depict the tops of tall, distinctively Mediterranean cypress trees that appear to be located on the other side of the courtyard walls, and this illusion is still further enhanced by the seamless blending of the dark blue painted sky behind these trees into the night sky painted on the ceiling of the room, which was originally covered with pale clouds and had small lights arrayed across it to suggest stars.

While the side walls of the auditorium and the ceiling are mostly responsible for creating the illusionistic quality sought by the designers, the focal point of the room is the great stage set into the south wall. Framed by the architectural contrivances described above, which are actually angled inward to frame the stage, the south wall of the auditorium is decorated with very tall banded columns topped by denticulated entablatures that support the stage's elaborate proscenium arch, while the spandrels above them are decorated with large plaster cartouches. Spanning the entire width of the wall above the arch is a full-width denticulated cornice, which is itself crowned by an elaborate, centrally positioned Baroque Style pediment that is decorated with a cabochon ornament.

Elaborate velvet curtains that once hung down across the stage opening (see Photo No. 11) have now been removed, but the original scrim curtain that hid the movie screen is still in place. Also still remarkably intact is much of the original

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<sup>5</sup> The pipes for the organ (non-extant) were originally located in the space behind these openings, which were originally filled with velvet curtains.

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stage machinery that fills the large five-story-tall stage housing that constitutes the entire south end of the auditorium wing. This machinery includes among other things the original switchboards that controlled the theater's very elaborate original lighting, and several very large hand painted flats that were used as backdrops for live theater productions and the machinery necessary to raise and lower them.

Other intact decorative elements of note in the auditorium include: four very large circular elements set into the underside of the balcony and evenly distributed across its width (see Photo No. 9) that were originally lit with indirect lighting and are each decorated with single very large patera in the form of a stylized flower; much of the original paint that decorated various elements in this room and the lobbies; and all the original metal and cloth-covered seats, which have been temporarily removed to facilitate the current restoration effort.

Remarkably, neither the exterior or interior of the Sheboygan Theater have suffered much from the effects of either time or later alterations despite the building's seventy year history. Minor changes have been made over the years, of course, but the only really significant alteration occurred in 1980, when the theater was "twinned" as the phrase goes, by creating two smaller theater spaces within the existing main auditorium space. The method used was to build two large side by side rectilinear drywall shells within the existing space, the walls of which were suspended from the ceiling on metal rods. Fortunately, aside from drilling holes into the ceiling for the supporting rods, no other structural alterations were made and the remodeling even retained the Theater's original seats. The Sheboygan Community Theater Foundation has now removed the 1980 drywall shell and the Foundation is now in the process of completely restoring this highly intact example of one of the great ages of American theater building. When this restoration is complete, the Sheboygan Theater will once again regain its rightful place as one of Sheboygan's historic showpieces.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The black and white photos of the interior that are included in this nomination were taken by a professional photographer ca.1942. They are used instead of current photos because they still accurately depict the interior of the Theater, which is currently undergoing a complete restoration and is in an unphotographable condition as of this writing.



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The Sheboygan Theater is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) for its local significance under National Register (NR) criterion C. More specifically, the Theater is being nominated because of its associations with the NR significance area of Architecture, a theme that is also identified in the State of Wisconsin's *Cultural Resource Management Plan* (CRMP). Research centered on evaluating this building using the Spanish Colonial style subsection of the Period Revival section of the Architectural Styles study unit of the CRMP's Architecture Theme section.<sup>7</sup> The results of this research is detailed below and confirms that the Sheboygan Theater is locally significant under criterion C as an outstanding, largely intact example of the type of larger movie theater that was built by the major motion picture studios and theater chains in the nation's middle size cities during the 1920s and 1930s.

The excellent Spanish Colonial Revival style Sheboygan Theater was built between 1927 and 1928 for Universal Pictures, Inc., of Hollywood, California. The head of Universal, Carl Laemmle (1867-1939), had come to America from Germany in 1884 at the age of 17. After serving as the general manager of the Continental Clothing Store in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, from 1894 until 1906, Laemmle became convinced of the eventual importance of the newly created motion picture industry and acquired his first theater in Chicago. By the time the Sheboygan Theater was under construction, Laemmle had founded his own motion picture-making studio, Universal Pictures, and had either bought or constructed 400 theaters nationwide. In 1928, the \$600,000 Sheboygan Theater was the newest and best unit of the Milwaukee Theater Circuit of Universal Theatrical Enterprises, Inc., the theater-owning division of Universal Pictures. The Theater was designed by architects on the staff of United Studios, Inc., a Chicago firm that specialized in designing motion picture theaters, many of which were owned by Universal Pictures. The general contractor was the Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, based Immel Construction Co., and much of the specialized interior work was produced by Chicago-based specialist firms. The opening of the Sheboygan Theater, which was then and is still by far the largest and most elaborate theater ever built in the city, was a major civic event that was chronicled in a special edition of *The Sheboygan Press*.<sup>8</sup> The Theater continued to be Sheboygan's largest and most important in the years that followed, but the growth of television and of smaller suburban movie theaters in the 1960s rendered it increasingly obsolete. After sitting vacant for a period of several years, the Sheboygan Theater was acquired by the non-profit Sheboygan Community Theater Foundation in 1997, which is totally restoring this still wonderfully intact resource for reuse as a theater and community civic center.

**Historic Context**

Industry and commerce began in the Sheboygan area in 1834 when William Paine erected a crude sawmill on the shore of the Sheboygan River midway between the falls of the river (which are located in the nearby city of Sheboygan Falls) and what was to become the site of Sheboygan at the place where the river empties into Lake Michigan. At first, despite the geographic advantages of Sheboygan's location, growth was slow in this area, and Sheboygan did not achieve village status until 1846. By 1853, however, the year that Sheboygan became a city, the natural advantages of its site were beginning to be utilized. Particularly rapid growth occurred in Sheboygan after the end of the Civil War thanks in large part to the creation of a number of what would become very large industries in the city, the most notable being ones that

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<sup>7</sup> Wyatt, Barbara (Ed.). *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*. Madison: State Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986, vol. 2 (Architecture), p. 2-32.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 17, 1928. Sheboygan Theater Section.

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were devoted to the processing of northern Wisconsin's timber resources into salable products such as furniture. By 1912, when the following overview of the history of the industrial enterprises of Sheboygan was written, the city had become a major manufacturing center in Wisconsin, a center that by 1929, would be the state's eighth largest city.

Lumber was the first commercial article made and then the manufacture of shingles was but a single step further.

Since the small and very primitive beginning mentioned above, the city of Sheboygan has attained a high place among manufacturing cities, not only of the state but also the nation, for in the production of certain styles of chairs Sheboygan is the leader of all competitors. In 1868 the manufacture of chairs was begun and Sheboygan eventually acquired the sobriquet of the Chair City. She became famous as such the country over, and the civilized world for that matter, as her chairs are in universal demand. By 1891, Sheboygan was listed as a manufacturing center to be reckoned with when other industrial centers were considered. About this time some of the largest establishments in the country for the manufacture of enameled goods [the Vollrath Company and the Kohler Co.] were founded and iron products, knit goods and various and numerous other articles began finding their way into the marts of the country from Sheboygan factories and mills.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, as Sheboygan's industries grew in size, the city's population boomed, reaching 8500 by 1884, 21,200 by 1891, 25,000 by 1903, and 30,955 by 1920. This growth was accompanied by the development of numerous new urban amenities as well, some of the most popular of which were the city's numerous new theaters, which featured vaudeville acts and other live theatrical events and the recently developed motion pictures. By 1924, *Wright's Sheboygan City Directory* for that year showed no fewer than eight theaters in operation in the city: the Aurora Theater (1012 Michigan Ave.); the Butterfly Theater (1509 S. 12th Street); the Gem Theater (710 N. 8th Street); The Idle Hour Theater (1827 N. 5th Street); The Lincoln Theater (1827 N. 15th St.); the Majestic Theater (523 N. 8th Street); the Rex Theater (927-931 N. 8th Street); and the Sheboygan Opera House (701 New York Avenue). Of these buildings, only the Rex Theater and the Sheboygan Opera House (built between 1903 and 1916) are known to have been built expressly as theaters, the others are thought to have mostly been converted store buildings that housed what at first were small operations of a type commonly called "nickelodeon" theaters.<sup>10</sup> Four years later, all eight of these theaters were still in operation according to the 1928 *Wright's Sheboygan City Directory*, but that year saw one more new listing as well, this being the brand new Sheboygan Theater that is the subject of this nomination.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zillier, Carl (Ed.). *History of Sheboygan County Wisconsin: Past and Present*. Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912, Vol. 1, pp. 305-306.

<sup>10</sup> Of these eight buildings only the shells of a couple of the smallest may still be partially extant. Both the Rex Theater and the Sheboygan Opera House (which was later known as the Van Der Vaart Theater and the Wisconsin Theater) have now been demolished, as has the Gem Theater.

<sup>11</sup> *Wright's Sheboygan City and County Directory*. Milwaukee: Wright Directory Co., 1928, p. 720. In the four intervening years since 1924, the Aurora had been renamed the Uptown and the Opera House was called the Van Der Waart.

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When Carl Laemmle first entered the motion picture business in 1906 he was the owner of two small nickelodeon type theaters in Chicago, where he quickly realized that his biggest problem was getting a steady supply of new films to show. His solution was to found his own film exchange business.

He [Laemmle] established the Laemmle Film Service, in Chicago, to provide a proper supply of films for his own theaters and to add to his profits by supplying others. The new venture grew by leaps and bounds. He knew the problems of the exhibitor because he was one himself. Other exhibitors found his service best calculated to their needs. In 1907 he increased his service by establishing exchanges in Evansville, Memphis, and Omaha. The next year saw new Laemmle Exchanges in Minneapolis, Portland, Oregon; Salt Lake City, Montreal, and Winnipeg. The exchange activity dwarfed his theater interests, but for a time he continued to hold on to his original houses for the purpose of keeping his fingers on the pulse of the exchange game, the better to serve his exchange customers

In May of that year [1909], Laemmle took another great step. He became a producer of film. This step was forced by his desire to get a proper supply of pictures for his exchanges. It was a move similar in motivation to that which forced him into the exchange field to get a supply of pictures for his theaters.

Entry into the producing field was brought about by the formation of the Independent Motion Picture Company by Laemmle — this name abbreviated to IMP. The first picture made by the IMP concern was "Hiawatha," which had the astounding length of 989 feet, a long picture in those days. This initial production was released in October, 1909. A second, "Love's Stratagem," 954 feet in length, followed several weeks later.

The next big step taken by Laemmle was the formation, in May, 1912, of the Universal Film Manufacturing Company, composed of six of the leading independent producers, controlled by such veterans as Laemmle, Chas. Bauman, David Horsley, P. A. Powers, and W. H. Swanson. The history of Universal from 1912 has not been without its struggles, its bitter fights and its perilous periods, but nevertheless it has been one of continuous progress and rapidly rising prestige. The status quo existed until 1920 when Powers sold out to Laemmle and the corporation was reorganized into the Universal Pictures Corporation.

In 1914, Universal bought a large tract several miles from Hollywood, and in 1915 Universal City, the first big production plant, was opened as the wonder of the age. Today [1928] this plant stands unique in the production field as the most elaborate and complete production center in the world.

In 1925, the Universal Pictures Corporation issued its first stock to the public and became established on the New York Stock Exchange. This year also saw another big move on the part of Laemmle. During the years between his first theatrical venture and the final entry of Universal into its full strength, power, and prestige, Laemmle's theater holdings were nominal, being merely enough to enable him to keep in touch with the exhibitor's problem, and to serve Universal Pictures in a few of the key centers, not only in the United States and Canada, but also in other parts of the world.

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Late in 1925, Laemmle launched upon a gigantic theater enterprise with 1000 theaters as the first objective. Since that time, by construction and purchases, Universal interests have acquired about 300 theaters throughout the United States and Canada.<sup>12</sup>

Among these 300-odd theaters was a chain of theaters in Wisconsin, such chains being known in the theater and motion picture trade as "circuits." Fifteen of these theaters were either owned or controlled in Milwaukee. Others were located in Racine, Kenosha, and other leading cities, and all were operated by Universal Theatrical Enterprises, Inc. as part of its Milwaukee Theater Circuit.<sup>13</sup> By 1927, favorable eyes were being turned towards Sheboygan and its sizable market.

The property for the site of the new theater was purchased in March, 1927. This included a lot 60x150 feet on Niagara Avenue from the late Frank Rosenthal; a lot 20x30 on Eight Street, from Miss Emma Kuehne; a piece of land, 15x30 feet at the rear of the millinery store, from John Bitter, and a lot 30x150 feet on Niagara Avenue, from George Resch. The transaction was carried out through Charles W. Finnegan, real estate broker, and was bought by George Hammerschlag representing the Arthur Strauss Company of Milwaukee, which made the deal for the Universal Theatrical Enterprises, Inc.

The general contract for the erection of the building was given the United Studios, Inc., of Chicago, in June, and excavating work as started by John Kwekk boom the first of August. During the latter part of August, the permit for the construction of the building was issued by Building Inspector Rudolph Jahn, and actual construction work was started by the Immel Construction Company the first of September. The theater was built under the personal supervision of A. C. Gurnea, supervising architect for the United Studios, Inc. The first schedule called for the completion of the building in July, this year [1928], but the work progressed faster than scheduled, and it was possible to arrange for the opening date Saturday [February 18, 1928].<sup>14</sup>

As the opening day for the Theater neared, Universal Picture's well-oiled publicity machinery saw to it that a continual series of articles about the building appeared in the local newspapers, articles that touched on construction progress, building details, and the opening day celebrations.

Many phases of the work on the new theater have been practically completed, other work is well under way, and the finishing touches will be put on the building in a few weeks, according to an announcement made by A. C. Gurnea, supervising architect for the United Studios. The building will have a seating capacity of 1550 people and will offer every possible convenience and facility to its patrons and employees.

The ceiling of the auditorium is finished except for painting and the Spanish garden wall treatment along the sides, one of the features of the interior decoration, is also ready for painting. The concrete has been laid and lathing was started today. It is estimated that 80 per cent of the mechanical and ventilating work is finished.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 17, 1928, Sheboygan Theater Section, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* January 19, 1928, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 17, 1928, Sheboygan Theater Section, p. 2.

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the heating apparatus has been installed and has been in operation for three weeks, ready for the five day drying process which will take place later. The huge fresh air fan has also been in readiness.

The work of plastering has been practically completed and the usher's room, men's smoking room, rest room, musician's rest room and dressing rooms have only to be painted. About ten days will be required to complete the work of plastering. The work throughout the building is well advanced save for the lobby and this part has been left until last and will be started the latter part of next week. The last process will be the interior decorating, which will be of the Spanish garden type with an atmospheric effect. The building, both interior and exterior will be one of the most beautiful in the state. The frontage will be of terra cotta.<sup>15</sup>

Other articles dealt with the personnel of the new theater. Because the Sheboygan Theater was built just prior to the advent of talking pictures, it was designed to house both live performances as well as movies, as was often the case at that time, and thus included a full stage house and associated equipment and personnel, an orchestra, an orchestra conductor, and an organist among its personnel.

The Sheboygan Theater concert orchestra is to be in charge of Ignatz Gadsy, who came here with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra several years ago. Mr. Gadsy played first violin as a member of the far-famed Berlin Symphony, which was regarded as one of the best musical organizations of its kind in the world. The new theater will be equipped with a Wurlitzer-Hope Jones pipe organ, which will cost \$20,000 to install. The instrument is of the latest style and will have all of the orchestra effects. Mr. Gross [the managing director of the Theater] said he would leave the announcement of the new organist to Mr. Gadsy upon his arrival.

Leo Du Mont of Sheboygan, who has been connected with several Broadway shows in New York in addition to having had several other beneficial experiences in the show world, will be the stage manager. Mr. Gross announced that the remaining members of the theater staff have also been engaged, including ten ushers, door men and others. The ushers will be attractively dressed in military uniforms with light blue trousers, dark blue coats, Sam Browne belts and military caps similar to the uniforms worn by the ushers in the Avalon theater in Chicago.

Besides the orchestra and pipe organ programs, moving picture programs are to be given at the week-day shows, but the week-end bills will take in five "big time" Orpheum vaudeville acts on Saturdays and Sundays.<sup>16</sup>

Just three days before the grand opening, yet another article announced that the name of the new movie palace was to be "Sheboygan Theater" and it supplied still more information about the building's interior.

There are 1600 upholstered, beautifully designed and comfortable chairs in the new entertainment house and there is standing room for 1000 more people.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. January 19, 1928, pp. 1, 10..

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* January 31, 1928, p. 7. This organ is one of the few original features of the Theater that is not still extant.

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The theater in construction, layout, public convenience and equipment will be on a par with many of the finest in the country. The interior is of the atmospheric type. With stars twinkling on a blue-sky background, and clouds moving below them, people in the building will have the feeling that they are seated under the natural sky. Concealed lighting that is being employed in the theater is effective. Color changes and blendings require an intricate switchboard system.

The theater will be provided with ladies rest room on the mezzanine, men's smoking and rest room in the basement. The box office is to be octagonal in shape with composite ornament, marble base, and handsomely decorated marble shelves. It is to be equipped with the latest type ticket machines and money changer. The ventilating system is of the latest design, insuring a continuous change of air and affording comfort in all seasons of the year.<sup>17</sup>

Opening day for the new theater was on Saturday, February 18, 1928, and it was celebrated in style with orchestral and organ concerts, vaudeville acts, and the world premier of a new Universal Pictures film, "Finders Keepers," starring Laura La Plante. Sheboygan's largest newspaper, *The Sheboygan Press*, dedicated a whole illustrated section of its Friday, February 17th issue to the new theater and bade welcome to it in an editorial the next day.

"Welcome to Sheboygan"

Financial returns are the best way to determine the success of any enterprise, and in this way the Sheboygan people will show their appreciation of Carl Laemmle, president of Universal Pictures, Inc., the man who made possible the new Sheboygan picture and vaudeville house. We have had occasion to view the interior of this building, and we are not boasting in the least when we say that it is the equal of any house of its size in the country. The elaborate draperies and the illumination all coordinate in a manner that lends beauty to the interior. Great throngs filled the theater this afternoon at the opening performance, and the same will be true this evening.<sup>18</sup>

The new theater was an instantaneous success thanks to its size and its elaborate decoration and it immediately became Sheboygan's premier motion picture and theatrical venue. Even while Sheboygan was celebrating, though, Universal was moving ahead with plans to build a new million-dollar theater in Racine, Wisconsin, along with other theaters elsewhere in the country, in order to reach Laemmle's one thousand theater goal. In 1936, however, Carl Laemmle sold his interest in Universal and he died just three years later. Subsequently, the Sheboygan Theater became a part of the Warner Brothers chain and it operated more or less successfully until the early 1950s, when both the industry and theatergoer's habits began to change. By 1950, larger theaters like the Sheboygan were beginning to feel the threat of competition in the form of television, and the growth of suburbia moved audiences away from the downtown cores where the older theaters were typically located. By 1980, the Sheboygan Theater was owned by the Marcus Theater Co., which decided to "twin" it, in the parlance of the time. This meant abandoning the balcony and creating two new one-story theater spaces

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<sup>17</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 14, 1928, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* February 18, 1928.

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within the existing auditorium space, which was done by building two large rectilinear plan drywall shells within the original auditorium. Even this measure failed to bring in sufficient revenue, however, and in 1995, the Theater was closed. Fortunately, in 1997 the vacant property was acquired by the City of Sheboygan. The City then transferred ownership to the non-profit Sheboygan Community Theater Foundation, which is currently in the process of completely restoring the building with the intent of making it into a community civic/cultural center.

**Architecture**

The Sheboygan Theater was completed in 1928 and is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places for its local significance as an excellent and exceptionally intact example of the application of Spanish Colonial Revival style design to a large urban motion picture theater. The Theater was built for Universal Pictures, Inc., of Hollywood, California, and was designed by architects on the staff of United Studios, Inc., a Chicago firm that specialized in designing motion picture theaters, many of which were commissioned and owned by Universal Pictures. The general contractor was the Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, based Immel Construction Co., and much of the specialized interior work was produced by Chicago and Minneapolis-based specialist firms. The Sheboygan Theater is an especially fine and intact example of the "atmospheric" type of movie theater that was developed in this country in the 1920s. Theaters of this type had interiors that consciously strove to provide theatergoers with the feeling that they had at least momentarily left their own city and had journeyed instead to some far-off exotic locale, which in the case of the Sheboygan Theater turned out to be a romantic summer garden in old Spain. That these interiors were the result of an architectural illusion-making process that was in many ways very similar to the sets of the movies themselves did not prevent them from being some of the most visually extravagant interiors created in the twentieth century, and the Sheboygan Theater is an especially fine and intact example of this now highly endangered resource type.

In his seminal book *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, historian David Naylor described both the building type itself and also the general building program that the construction of motion picture theaters such as the Sheboygan Theater followed.

Aside from the skyscraper, no building type is more clearly representative of twentieth-century American architecture than the movie palace. The palace architects were faced with a building program almost unrivaled in their day in complexity, requiring vast collections of rooms under one roof and often situated on ridiculously irregular plots of land. British architect Clifford Worthington wrote in 1931, "Of all buildings, none are more fascinating to design, or difficult to construct than the cinema." Nonetheless, the movie palaces went up all around the country, often at breakneck speed. During the peak construction years, 1925 through 1930, even the largest theaters were usually completed in well under a year, although the workmen may not have tacked down the last piece of carpeting until a few minutes before the opening.

The theaters were spectacles in their own right. The movie palaces were built not just to express the romantic extremes of architectural design, but also to serve a purpose purely economic in nature; to draw patrons to the box office.

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The exteriors of the movie palaces helped to fulfill this end. While rarely as opulent or exotic as the interiors, the facades were still quite distinct from the surrounding cityscape. Even if the theater were housed within an office block it could be distinguished by its broad canopy marquee, often supplemented by a towering vertical marquee. The theater designers pioneered the use of electric lighting as advertisement. Their special effects included tracer and chaser light bulbs and rows of stud lights used to outline the ornamental shapes of the facades. Oversize promotional pictures around the box office [also] helped draw the crowds.

Once through the bronze outer doors of a movie palace, the ticket holder inevitably found himself progressing through a breathtaking group of lobby spaces. Sometimes the lobbies were more impressive than the auditorium. Put simply by designer E. C. A. Bullock of the [Chicago] firm of Rapp & Rapp, the lobbies had to be spectacular "to keep the patron's mind off the fact that he was waiting." Leading off the lobbies were promenades filled with expensive art objects and magnificent staircases.

With several shows a day instead of a single play or concert, easing the flow of patrons in and out of the theater became a prime consideration. The palace architects carefully worked out crowd circulation patterns to insure safety and convenience. The architects were aided in their efforts by a feature they did not have to design, for the flow of traffic was directed by the movie palace's own brand of traffic cop, the usher. The elite corps of ushers was uniformed and trained like a crack drill unit. The position of usher carried great honor and serious responsibility.

The usher directed patrons to more parts of the theaters than the seats. The ornate lobbies and auditoriums were the most magnificent areas of any movie palace, but there were other public spaces provided for the patron's convenience. Exotic lounges were included for smoking or just sitting. Furniture from royal mansions sometimes found its way into the men's and women's lounges.

The backstage rooms were nearly as diverse in their functions as the public rooms. Actors' dressing rooms were stacked up at either end of the stage and additional dressing rooms were provided below stage for the theater musicians who played during the live part of the show. Top-flight orchestras of the day filled the pits of the palaces, playing everything from classical masterpieces to contemporary hits.

Tucked beneath the collection of public and performance spaces was the sprawling subterranean area needed to house the theater's support system. Huge machines were needed to heat and ventilate these buildings. The methods the palace architects devised for cooling such tremendous volumes of space played an important role in the development of modern air-conditioning systems.<sup>19</sup>

What is especially interesting about Naylor's description of the palace theater type is that it applies not only to the largest examples found in the nation's biggest cities but to smaller examples of the type as well such as the Sheboygan Theater.

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<sup>19</sup> Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981, pp. 32-40.



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All the elements that Naylor describes above can be found in the Sheboygan Theater, albeit on a somewhat reduced scale, including large electrified marquees, multiple lobbies, corps of ushers, multiple lounges, backstage and below stage dressing rooms, elaborate stage mechanisms, and large subterranean heating and ventilating systems. Clearly, then, the formula for building a successful combination motion picture/live theater was well established by 1927, when the Sheboygan Theater was designed.

The Sheboygan Theater is also of architectural significance as an excellent example of what was then called an "atmospheric" theater. Once again, Naylor supplies both a good definition and historic overview of this important variant of 1920s motion picture theater design. Naylor ascribes this innovation to noted Austrian-born theater designer John Eberson.

It was his [Eberson's] design for the Hoblitzelle Majestic (1923, razed) in Houston that put Eberson in the spotlight and shook the complacency of the traditionalists among palace architects. For the design of the Houston Majestic, Eberson replaced the standard ornate ceiling dome with a star-covered blue plaster sky. The twinkling constellations were occasionally obscured by clouds projected from a hidden Brenograph magic lantern machine. Cumulus and nimbus clouds drifted lazily overhead in endless succession. The effect was achieved simply by passing a strip of negatives in front of a 1500-watt light bulb.

The open-air illusion was enhanced by the stage-set walls encircling the auditorium, creating the feeling of being enclosed in an ancient Italian garden. Vines trailed over the walls and, overhead, a few stuffed birds hung in mock flight. With this crowd-pleasing first act, John Eberson gave birth to the atmospheric theater.

The atmospheric theaters were extremely conducive to hosting the fantasy worlds that the film makers sought to create for theater patrons. As the name implies, an atmospheric [theater] contains within its walls the air of some distant and exotic outdoor arena. The Houston Majestic was just a start. Atmospherics of every kind soon appeared; as composed by John Eberson: "We visualize and dream a magnificent amphitheater, an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian templeyard, all canopied by a soft moonlit sky."

Eberson saw variety as "the primary demand of an amusement-loving public," and worked to fulfill that demand. Great pains were taken to ensure that the side walls in an Eberson theater never matched. He showed an inexhaustible capacity to blend decorative elements and rearrange statuary. Donatello's David or the Venus de Milo might have been present in a dozen Eberson theaters, but never in exactly the same place or setting. Eberson went so far as to organize his own workshop, aptly titled Michelangelo Studios, in order to supply these plaster masterpieces for his theaters. [Historian] Ben Hall was moved to call Eberson "an archeologist, weatherman, and landscape gardener rolled into one."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Naylor, David, op. cit., pp. 68-69.

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Sheboygan, Sheboygan County, Wisconsin

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By 1927, the basic features of the atmospheric style had been widely distributed and were apparently being incorporated into most of the larger theaters then being built for Universal Pictures, including the Sheboygan Theater. The supervising architect of the Sheboygan Theater was Ralph L. Beaudry, an architect employed by the United Studios, Inc. of Chicago, and the superintendent of construction was A. C. Gurnee, another architect employed by the company.<sup>21</sup> The head of the United Studios was Larry P. Larsen, a Danish-born immigrant.

L. P. Larsen, president and general manager of the United Studios, Inc. of Chicago; a concern which designs and builds theaters complete, is a native of Copenhagen, Denmark, where he studied art in the Royal Academy. When he was a lad the family came to the United States, going directly to Oshkosh. Young Larsen, his soul hungry for art tuition unavailable in his hometown, ran away to Chicago where he studied art by night and acted as a scenic artist by day. His rapid rise in the fields of decoration and architecture led him to form his own company in 1920. This is known as the United Studios, Inc.; a concern that stands unique and in a field of its own making. It is the only enterprise designing and executing theaters from the laying of the first steel and stone to the finished product completely equipped ready to present entertainment and receive patronage.

Mr. Larsen is particularly enthusiastic over the latest innovation in theatrical architecture, the atmospheric theater. It was he who built the first house of this type east of the Mississippi. This theater was erected in Worcester, Mass., and was considered one of the outstanding show pieces of the east, both from architectural and entertainment standpoints. The United Studios have since built similar places from coast to coast. Handsome theatrical structures, involving millions of dollars, are under way for Carl Laemmle in Racine and other points, states Mr. Larsen.<sup>22</sup>

Larsen and the United Studios, Inc. were thus very familiar with atmospheric designs by the time Universal's Sheboygan Theater project was begun and their finished product for that city clearly shows the debt they owed to Eberson and the other early pioneers of the fashion. The following description of the new theater printed in the *Sheboygan Press* the day before the grand opening makes it clear that the interior more than lived up to expectations, although the somewhat overheated prose was probably greatly indebted to the publicists at Universal Pictures.

It is a far cry from the days when Spanish Galleons were the pirates of the high seas and Pizarro and Cortez conquered and plundered the fabulous riches of Mexico and South America to the age in which men span the ocean in less than two days. Yet when patrons of the Sheboygan Theater, which opens tomorrow afternoon at 12:30 o'clock look about them they will behold magnificence and dazzling abundance undreamed of by those old Spanish conquerors.

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<sup>21</sup> Wisconsin Division of Safety & Buildings. Bureau of Buildings & Structures. Building Plans Correspondence (E-Files), 1914-1989. Box 412, File No. 83762. Letters between the United Studios, Inc. and the Industrial Commission of Wisconsin dated August 3, 1927; August 9, 1927; December 20, 1927; and April 2, 1928.

<sup>22</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 17, 1928, Sheboygan Theater Section, p. 10.

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It was only after months of thoughtful consideration that it was decided to build the theater on a Spanish design and to create an atmosphere of sunny Spain throughout the interior. No detail has been overlooked and the completed theater exudes the exotic romance and splendor of Spain with such fidelity that it might well be an exact replica of the Alcazar, the famous old castle of Madrid.

Ultra-modern in every respect, a fascinating playground of dazzling new luxuries and up-to-date conveniences; the effect of elegance is impressed immediately upon entering the lobby. Every detail suggests Spain and one might fancy the sound of clicking castanets and the tap of Spanish dancing heels. From the richly decorated open lobby and the unique ticket office down to the luxuriously furnished lounge rooms for women on the mezzanine floor and for men in the basement, there is a magic quality that makes the visitor gaze in wonder.

General treatment of the theater is of the Spanish design, with picturesque castles and cathedral spires arranged around the sides under a blue canopied sky that is made to appear a living reality with rolling clouds and the twinkling stars. One must be deeply conscious of his actual whereabouts in order not to be deluded into thinking that he is out beneath the open skies of a perfect night in June, watching a screen and vaudeville program.

Gorgeous draperies thrown tastefully over balustrades and other appurtenances in the building greatly enhance the exquisite richness of the interior decoration, making it a dreamland instead of a building of brick, stone, and mortar.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, even though the Sheboygan Theater was in fact a unique design cleverly adapted to its particular site, neither the interior photos on the front page of the *Sheboygan Press's* special theater section nor drawings of the exterior and interior in the same section that illustrate the full page ad placed by the United Studios, Inc. actually depicts the Sheboygan Theater itself. Instead, both show other theaters of Spanish-influenced design that were also probably created by United Studios, Inc. for Universal Pictures, which is suggestive of both the scope of the theater-building activities of Universal Pictures and of the ability of their designers to create custom designs within what by then must have been well established design formulas.

Because of its date of construction and because of the Spanish elements in its design, the Sheboygan Theater is considered to be an example of Spanish Revival design, which is a branch of the Period Revival styles. Clearly, though, designs such as this one push the definitions of the Period Revival styles to their limits. Not only were historic styles such as this being applied to building types that had no historic precedent but they also used historical design elements in totally new ways that actually have more in common with some of today's Post Modern usages of historic styles than with the scholarly application of the styles that is more typically associated with them. Never-the-less, what these buildings lack in historical accuracy is more than made up for by sheer architectural exuberance and panache. Such designs may have had the bottom line as their rationale but they were obviously designed by people who were in love with the possibilities of historic architecture.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Sheboygan Press*. February 17, 1928, Sheboygan Theater Section, p. 1.

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The Sheboygan Theater is thus being nominated to the NRHP because it is a very fine example of the type of larger theaters that were built by theater chains and motion picture studios throughout the nation in the 1920s to house both motion pictures and live theater productions. The largest of these extraordinarily elaborate buildings were constructed in the nation's major cities and the few survivors are rightly prized as some of this century's most elaborate and unique works of architecture. Smaller scale examples, however, can be found in the nation's smaller cities as well and they too are becoming increasingly rare and are an extremely endangered resource type. It is remarkable, therefore, given the relatively large size of the Sheboygan Theater, the elaborate nature of its original decoration, and its seventy-year age, that this building has survived until today with such a high degree of integrity. Despite having been "twinned" in 1980, nearly all the original features of the building excepting only its pipe organ are still intact today and are now being expertly restored.

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**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

S20' of N80' of Lot 1 & S15' of N75' of E½ of Lot 2, W½ of Lot 2, and all of Lot 3, Block 127.  
Original Plat of the Village of Sheboygan. The boundaries enclose an area of less than one acre.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The boundaries of the Sheboygan Theater enclose all the land historically associated with the building.

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Items a-d are the same for photos 1 and 3-7.

Photo 1

- a) Sheboygan Theater
- b) Sheboygan, Sheboygan County, WI
- c) Timothy F. Hegglund, October 28, 1997
- d) State Historical Society of Wisconsin
- e) View of main facade., View looking W
- f) Photo 1 of 11

Photo 2

- c) Historic Photo, ca.1942
- e) View of main facade, View looking W
- f) Photo 2 of 11

Photo 3

- e) General view of N. Eighth Street, View looking NE
- f) Photo 3 of 11

Photo 4

- e) View of south-facing side elevation, View looking N
- f) Photo 4 of 11

Photo 5

- e) View of west-facing rear elevation, View looking E
- f) Photo 5 of 11

Photo 6

- e) View of north-facing side elevation, View looking S
- f) Photo 6 of 11

Photo 7

- e) General view of N. Eighth Street-Niagara Avenue corner, View looking SW
- f) Photo 7 of 11

Photo 8

- c) Historic photo ca.1942.
- e) General view of Main Lobby, View looking W
- f) Photo 8 of 11

Photo 9

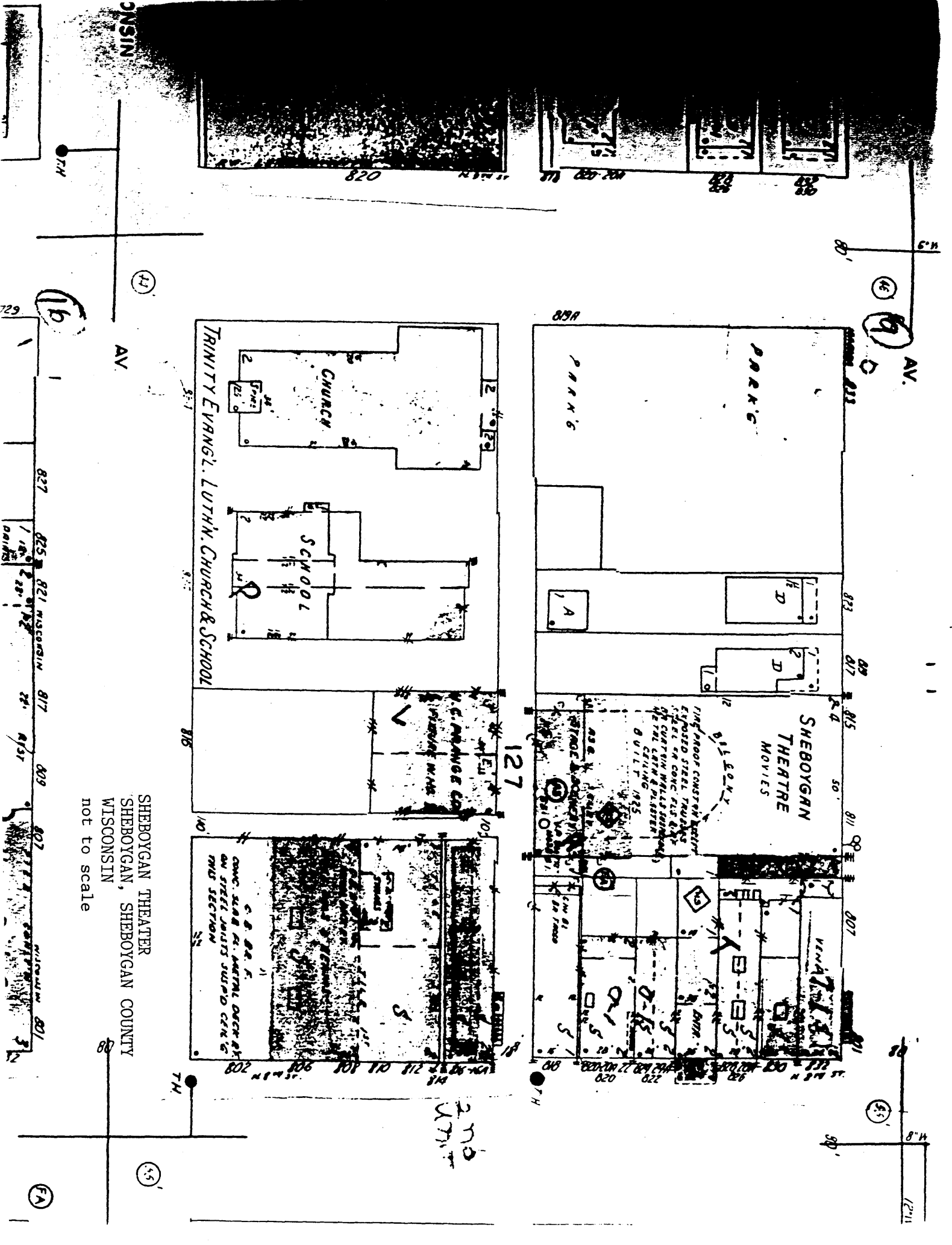
- c) Historic Photo ca.1942
- e) Rear of main auditorium, View looking N
- f) Photo 9 of 11

Photo 10

- c) Historic Photo ca.1942
- e) Side of main auditorium, View looking W
- f) Photo 10 of 11

Photo 11

- c) Historic Photo ca.1942
- e) Front of main auditorium, View looking S
- f) Photo 11 of 11



SHEBOYGAN THEATER  
 SHEBOYGAN, SHEBOYGAN COUNTY  
 WISCONSIN  
 not to scale

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